

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO INTERVIEW WITH SHAQUANA GARDNER

FARAI CHIDEYA (host): One of those teen educators is 17-year-old Shaquana Gardner. She's a high school student and a Teen Advocate for Planned Parenthood in New York City. Welcome, Shaquana! So you obviously have a voice because you are speaking to peers all the time.

SHAQUANA GARDNER (Teen Advocate): Yes.

FARAI CHIDEYA: What exactly is a Teen Advocate?

SHAQUANA GARDNER: The Teen Advocate program is basically a group of teens that get educated about sexual and reproductive health. We get educated in the summertime through an intensive training and then throughout the year. We go and create skits and learn how to facilitate workshops, and then we go to different community organizations and we facilitate those workshops and perform those skits in front of other teens.

FARAI CHIDEYA: What kinds of questions do people come to you with?

SHAQUANA GARDNER: They range from a lot of questions. Some people come and they'll say, you know, I had unprotected sex. Do you know how I can get emergency contraception? Or other people say, you know, is it possible that I could have an STD, and they'll give me certain symptoms, like burning while urinating or itching, that type of stuff. Or they'll say, I've had a lot of sexual partners -- is that bad or is that good, those types of questions.

FARAI CHIDEYA: Black youth are particularly at risk for HIV and AIDS. What kind of messaging do you do around HIV and AIDS? And also since you are with Planned Parenthood, I'm assuming that you're not giving them an abstinence talk, more of a different kind of talk that focuses on how to deal with sexual behavior in addition to abstinence.

SHAQUANA GARDNER: We just tell them their options. We say, you know, the most protective method is abstinence, which is 100 percent. And then if you choose not to remain abstinent, then you should do this. You can use condoms and birth control and that type of stuff. HIV is a major risk for black youth, and for Latino youth also, so I'm really happy that we're active in the Lower East Side where there are a lot of black and Latino youth.

I try and give the information as best as I know it and tell them to just stay protected because it really isn't that difficult to use a condom. If you choose to have sex, protect yourself because your life is worth a lot, so is your body, and you should try and protect both.

FARAI CHIDEYA: When you think about yourself as a 17-year-old, how has it changed your life being a peer educator? How has it changed your relationship to issues of sex and sexuality being someone who's out there talking to people your own age?

SHAQUANA GARDNER: I would say that it's made me a major activist. And if you asked me four years ago what I'd be, I don't think I could have predicted that. Because becoming a Teen Advocate, it really opened my eyes to so much -- to what's going around, like laws that are trying to keep teens from knowing this and knowing that. I love to teach and I love to learn. I feel like I get to do both of those. And I want everybody to know their options. I think having options is the most important thing a person can have in their life.

FARAI CHIDEYA: Well, Shaquana, it sounds like you got a lot on your plate. Thanks for talking to us.

PPNYC INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA RIVERA

Why did you become a Teen Advocate?

I really felt like I needed a stable job during my junior year in high school. I was going to be a senior soon, and the extra cash would help. A very good friend knew that I was desperately seeking employment and she handed me an application for an after-school job. It was for a new program in the South Bronx and they were looking for youth to hire as "peer educators." I was really excited to learn that I would be getting \$7 an hour if hired. I didn't know much about Planned Parenthood at the time. I didn't even know of its existence in my neighborhood, but after looking over the application I applied for the job anyway.

Three weeks after my interview I received a phone call. I was HIRED!!! I met the other peer educators on orientation day. Jose Arguelles, who was the coordinator at the time, gave us a run-down on training, our duties, and his expectations of us as new Teen Advocates. For the first time in my teenage life, I began to experience a job like no other. It wasn't like working at a fast food restaurant or a clothing store, and, trust me, I've had my share of that as well. I was learning about real-life issues that affected youth in my community.

What did you do as a Teen Advocate?

After three months of intensive training, we were ready to take on the streets. Our mission was to present workshops to youth in the local community. That quickly changed into creating and performing skits relevant to sexuality issues. At first, to be honest, I wasn't thrilled with the idea. The last time I had performed anything was in 6th grade, but I went along with the program. We created about 4-5 skits and performed them at after-school programs, community centers, and local events. As we did more and more skits, I became more comfortable performing in front of my peers. With some support from acting coaches and critiques among ourselves our performances improved over time.

As the program grew, we were presented with new opportunities. We transitioned from Teen Advocates to Senior Advocates. The program expanded to provide us with summer internships, and I eventually landed an internship at Choice USA in Washington, DC, for two summers. It was exciting to know that there was a world beyond my community and that I could be a part of it.

What did you get out of being a Teen Advocate?

Unfortunately and fortunately, the program has an age limit, and when my time came I was so sad to go. But I was prepared to face new challenges and new opportunities outside of PPNYC. Looking back, I feel so grateful to have been a part of such a wonderful program that wasn't afraid to give youth a voice. The Teen Advocate program gave me the tools to educate myself and others, but most of all provided a space where I was able to make friends, memories, and a positive path for my future. I went on to become the Youth Advocate at Montefiore Medical Center's Adolescent AIDS Program, where I worked for four years.

Why did you decide to return to PPNYC after graduating from the Teen Advocate program?

Now, I've returned to the program that helped me to grow. I'm the new coordinator of PPNYC's Teen Advocate program in the South Bronx. I know that this may sound like a cliché, but I really want to give back to the new generation of advocates and to the community as well. I also love what the program has done for youth in the South Bronx, from empowerment to education and career opportunities. I would like to continue being a part of that tradition.

What advice would you give to someone thinking of becoming a Teen Advocate?

For anyone thinking of becoming a Teen Advocate, I would say "Don't hesitate and just do it!" Especially if acting is something you love, this would be a great opportunity. There are other responsibilities as well, but as long as you can keep a balance between school and work you will definitely love this program. I would say that 99.9% of the Advocates who have come to this program don't want to leave, but we have to be fair and share the opportunity with the new and upcoming stars.

PPNYC INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY LEE

Why did you become a Teen Advocate?

I became a Teen Advocate because I needed another job! Well, at least at first, but when the Teen Advocates did a workshop at my old job, I liked the performance. It had a point and it looked like fun so I thought I'd give it a try.

What did you do as a Teen Advocate?

What didn't I do!? I performed skits about sexuality for other teens my age. I also got to write some of the skits the Teen Advocates still use today. I participated in several news articles about the program and publicly spoke about the program and PPNYC. We took various trips, and the most memorable was to England.

When working with the community, I passed on the knowledge that I acquired from PPNYC. I became a resource and "dictionary" for sex-related issues and a source of contraceptives. I ran out of condoms and pamphlets faster than the stores run out of the *Daily News* each day! I gave my time and energy to the community in an educational way that people still remember to this day! People used to say, "Didn't he play big-mouth Melvin from that skit we saw at the center?" Man, I miss those days!

What did you get out of being a Teen Advocate?

I got a lot of experience out of being a Teen Advocate. Many of my leadership skills came from my job as an Advocate, such as the ability to mediate problems between people, and being a resource and source of information for my friends about sexuality issues. I also made a lot of friends and mentors.

Why did you return to PPNYC as a Data Systems Specialist after graduating from the Teen Advocate program?

I stayed with PPNYC mainly because of the people here. My supervisors and co-workers always pushed me to be better than I was and always looked out for me like family. I wasn't just another face. There are people here whose names I still don't know, but they know who I am.

What advice would you give to new Teen Advocates?

Get as much as you can out of PPNYC. The people, the places, and everything should be a learning experience and never be afraid to ask questions or for help. Take advantage of every opportunity that is available to you here, because you may not get a chance for it anywhere else.